

With My Whole Heart

Studies in Psalm 119

Emalyn Spencer

A study of whole-hearted Christian
devotion, commitment and service
based on texts from Psalm 119.

*Blessed are those whose way is blameless,
who walk in the law of the Lord.*

*Blessed are those who keep his testimonies,
who seek him with their whole heart.*

Psalm 119:1-2

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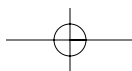
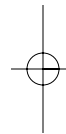
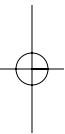
We are pleased to present to you another study designed for women in the Presbyterian Church in America. This year's author is Mrs. John (Emalyn) Spencer. This elect lady is a member of the Briarwood PCA in Birmingham, Alabama. Her husband has been an elder in that congregation.

Mrs. Spencer is the author of an earlier study *PROVERBS 31: A WOMAN THAT FEARS THE LORD*. There have been many printings of that particular study due to its popular reception, not only in women's studies but also in other areas of the Church's Christian growth.

PSALM 119: WITH MY WHOLE HEART is a delight to read. The studies are taken from Psalms 119. We commend it to you with hopes and prayers that God will use it to help you love Him with your whole heart.

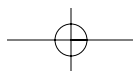
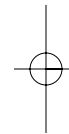
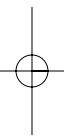
We express our appreciation to Mrs. Spencer for her willingness and diligence in writing this study.

Charles H. Dunahoo, Coordinator CEP



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1

“I Am a Sojourner”

Verse 19

In 1620 a determined little band of hardy souls set sail from England for unfamiliar shores to make their home in an unknown land. They were willing to take great risks and to make many sacrifices in order to live where they would have freedom to worship God and to govern themselves under His guidance. William Bradford, who was to become the second governor of Plymouth Colony, referred to himself and them as "pilgrims and strangers upon the earth." Thus these early settlers of this country have come to be called the Pilgrims.

In recent years we have heard much about the identity crisis. People are asking "Who am I?" and "Where am I going?" The answer to these questions for the Christian is "I am a stranger in the earth and I am going to my home in heaven." For that is what Christians are. We are strangers and pilgrims, sojourners and foreigners, and our life experience from birth to death is only a journey through a foreign country to our permanent home. Earth is a temporary home, and we are merely guests passing through. When we say we are strangers and pilgrims in earth we are saying that we seek a better, or a heavenly country, a continuing city, as did our fathers before us (Hebrews 11:13-16 and 13:14).

Joseph described his life on earth as "the days of the years of my sojourning..." (Genesis 47:9). David calls himself a stranger and a

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sojourner as his fathers were (Psalm 39:12; 1 Chronicles 29:14-15). Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were called "strangers and exiles on the earth" (Hebrews 11:8, 9, 13). Everyone on earth is either a stranger to the world and a friend to God, as Abraham was (James 2:23), or a friend to the world and a stranger to God (Ephesians 2:12).

Paul, in Philippians 3:20, identifies himself as an earthly pilgrim when he says that his conversation, or citizenship, is in heaven. He exchanges all things for the knowledge of Christ. Nothing else matters to him (verse 8). In contrast, he speaks of those citizens of earth who mind earthly things and whose chief objective is to satisfy the appetite of the flesh (vv. 18-19).

Until we thoroughly grasp what it means to be a citizen of heaven and a sojourner, or a pilgrim on earth, we cannot understand and experience whole-hearted love and devotion to God, for we will have our priorities misplaced and our values distorted. There is no way we can live whole-heartedly for Jesus without realizing that we do not belong to this world, and it does not belong to us. Once we understand and accept our identity as a pilgrim we can learn how to fix our gaze, our mind, and our affections on heaven in a manner appropriate to our role (Colossians 3:2).

A foreigner visiting in another country should behave in a way to reflect honor on his homeland, but unfortunately this is not always the case. American tourists are frequently inconsiderate, rude and tactless, so much so that several years ago a book, *The Ugly American*, was written dealing with the unattractive American image abroad. As citizens of heaven, we should be especially careful to bring honor to our Sovereign God with our conduct.

Would anyone know that I am a stranger in the earth, or do I just blend in with the landscape, absorbed in the customs and culture of the world? We can often recognize a foreigner by his speech or accent (Matthew 26:69-73). Do I accentuate, or emphasize, my heavenly heritage by the way I speak? Or does fascination with worldly treasures dominate the topics of my conversation? If we simply "praise the Lord"

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every other sentence, we tarnish and cheapen the expression by inappropriate overuse. But we can praise God with "an upright heart," or the goodness inside that motivates outward behavior (119:7). We can speak of his wondrous works (119:27) and his word (119:172). And we can be known for truthfulness and reliability (119:29-30). The consistency of these practices in our lives will reveal something about us that is different from most others and help to identify us as pilgrims.

We may look to our pilgrim fathers (maybe not those who came over on the Mayflower, but our spiritual ones, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, for an appreciation of the qualities that set the pilgrim apart.

First is faith. If we desire with all our hearts to please God we must believe His promises with all our hearts and in faith obey His commands (Hebrews 11:6). It is faith that enables us to believe in the existence of an all-powerful, all-wise and all-loving God, and to respond to him in obedience. Note the example of Abraham who by faith obeyed God's call to a strange country and sojourned there (8-9).

Second, a pilgrim does not love the world. He is not attached to, or a slave to all the pretty playthings and pleasant pastimes of the world that would sap his money, strength, time and thought. (By sap I mean to undermine by digging away foundations.) "Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of possessions—is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever" (1 John 2:15-17). The only way we can not love the world, as we are of necessity passing through, is to love God more and more and more.

Because he is merely traveling through the world, like Christian in *The Pilgrim's Progress*, the earthly pilgrim has his eyes fixed on the Celestial City. Look again at Hebrews 11:14-16. These fathers in the faith said that they were pilgrims and strangers, and by this admission made plain that they had their eyes on a better country, a heavenly city prepared for them by God. Paul expressed so

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beautifully the longing that a Christian has for his "house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens" (2 Corinthians 5:1-2). We look not to a place only to be rid of earthly cares and troubles; nor to an experience of rewards and eternal peace and security. But, we look to the heavenly city because it is the dwelling place of God the Father and God the Son, and to be in their holy and awesome presence, praising them for eternity, is the destiny for which we were created.

A dear friend of mine in her nineties telephoned me one day—to say goodbye. Her health had been failing, and she was feeling that soon, perhaps that very day, the chariot would be coming to take her to heaven. We had talked of this many times, and she was ready and longing to go. Yet, I thought to lift her spirits by mentioning the beauty of the day and the loveliness of God's springtime all around us. I was gently rebuked by her response. "Today, I have my eyes on nothing in this world," she said. What a homesick pilgrim!

Being a foreigner on this earth poses certain problems and questions. How do I keep my eyes on heaven while my feet are walking around on earth? How can I be "in the world" and not "of the world," and what does this mean, anyway? This is what Jesus said about believers, and it means that while we are living, or temporarily residing in the world, we must not be a part of the world system, or subject to the lust, covetousness and pride mentioned in 1 John 2:16 (John 17:11, 14 and 16). Paul pleads with us not to be conformed to this world, but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds (Romans 12:1-2).

However, contemporary conditions are presenting great temptations to many a pilgrim. There has never been such an abundance of "things" to captivate our hearts or such an array of amusing and entertaining activities to pursue as there is right now in the first part of the 21st century, nor have there been more persuasive means to entice us to desire them. And that isn't the entire problem. Most of us today have more money than we have ever had in our lives, or even dreamed of having.

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We are locked into an environment from which we cannot escape. There are influences all around us which make an impact on our conscious or sub-conscious will. We are exposed to these temptations whenever we walk through a store, look in the store windows, watch television, or read magazines or newspapers. Even visiting in one another's homes or just living next door to the "Joneses" can provide an occasion to lust or covet.

Christians are not immune to the disease of materialism, although the infection may not be as acute as it is in others. The danger is heightened for Christians; however, as we tend to think we have a built-in protection because we are Christians. We are made of the same flesh as the rest of the world, and the same pretty trinkets dangle before our eyes. Satan has such subtle ways of convincing us that we have not fallen into the trap of materialism, but are merely filling our needs and gratifying normal and reasonable desires. In truth, we have often gone to excesses. We have to make a heroic effort to be honest with ourselves in judging what is a necessity, a convenience, a luxury or an extravagance. Often the gratification of one desire merely causes it to move over and make room for another. But we can learn to control our appetites in the power of the Holy Spirit, for temperance is a part of the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:23). And we can learn and apply the secret of contentment, which is to "Be content with what you have" (Hebrews 13:5). Contentment results when we think more about what we do have and less about what we don't have; when we employ creative and new ways to enjoy the things we already have; when we learn to appreciate the little and the simple things of life; and when we become truly thankful for all our blessings.

To control our desires we must control our thoughts. If we habitually dream about, wish for, or imagine that we have certain things, picturing ourselves owning and enjoying them, these thoughts will probably lead us to contrive to get them. Or make us discontented without them. In Psalm 119:113 David says "I hate the double-minded." We could make useful application here as a warning to avoid thought

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habits that are empty, meaningless, shallow—or world-centered. "I hate the double-minded, but I love your law." Here is the antidote. A heart inclined, leaning toward, desiring the testimonies of God will be inclined away from covetousness, or greed, or envy (119:36).

"Why are you gazing up into heaven?" the angel asked the apostles after Jesus' ascension, for they couldn't take their eyes off the spot where last they had seen Him. The secret of the pilgrim life is the pilgrim gaze. We must keep our eyes, or our attention and affections on those eternal things which cannot be seen (2 Corinthians 4:18), but which by faith we know to be—God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, heaven. We are to keep "looking to Jesus," the author (Savior) and finisher (Sanctifier) of our faith, as we run the race, or make the journey through earth to heaven (Hebrews 12:1 and 2).

When doubts, fears and anxieties beset me I can usually detect the reason: I have taken my eyes off Jesus and the vision of the heavenly city, my eternal destiny. I have lost sight of my identity and have forgotten that I am a stranger and a pilgrim on earth. I have let my eyes focus on the temporal things of this world and am looking to them to fill my needs. There is a danger even in resting our gaze on the results of trusting Christ. Charles Spurgeon said, "I looked at Christ and the dove of peace flew into my heart; I looked at the dove of peace and it flew away." Keep looking to Jesus!

There is joy, yes, and great peace of mind that result from loving and obeying God. But the Christian life is not easy. Jesus said we would have tribulation in the world (John 16:33). Christianity is not a religion of fun and games, as some would try to make it. It is more like warfare, and Paul's advice to Timothy to endure hardness as a good soldier of Jesus Christ (2 Timothy 2:3-4) also applies to a pilgrim, for they are one and the same. "Am I a soldier of the cross?" or "Must I be carried to the skies on beds of flowery ease?" I always wince when I sing that line of the hymn.

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Yes, the journey is difficult, but we are not without resources. God has made provisions, to encourage and strengthen us "to abstain from the passions of the flesh which wage war against your soul" (1 Peter 2:11).

One of the most heartening passages in all of Scripture is this saying of Jesus: "I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). This promise is reinforced in 1 John 4:4: "...for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world." Wondrous thought—He is in me! And He is more powerful than any force in all the world or the universe, in Christ's prayer for believers He asked not that His Heavenly Father should take them out of the world, but that He should keep them from evil (John 17:15). This prayer for all believers included us, as we see in verse 20.

There is another source of encouragement for the earthly traveler which is suggested in Psalm 119:54: "For these laws of yours have been my source of joy and singing through all the years of my earthly pilgrimage" (Living Bible). Our hymns are beautiful settings of Scripture and of Biblical truths which lift our hearts as we sing them. We are told to speak to one another "in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart" (Ephesians 5:19). "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God" (Colossians 3:16). One of the original purposes in the Old Testament of putting the laws and testimonies of God to music was to aid in memorizing them. We are encouraged as God's mighty truths are pressed into our hearts and minds through the singing or the saying of these statutes to ourselves and to each other.

Approximately a half century after the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth John Bunyan wrote his famous allegory, *The Pilgrim's Progress*. At a point in the story Mr. By-ends has just met up with Christian and Hopeful, who have refused to let him join them on their journey to the Celestial City because he will not accept their standards.

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Mr. By-Ends describes these two travelers to Mr. Save-All;

"Why they after their headstrong manner, conclude that it is duty to rush on their journey all weathers, and I am for waiting for Wind and Tide. They are for hazarding all for God, at a clap, and I am for taking all advantages to secure my life and estate. They are for holding their notions, though all other men are against them: But I am for Religion in what, and so far as the times, and my safety will bear it. They are for Religion when in rags, and contempt; but I am for him when he walks in his golden slippers in the Sun-shine, and with applause."

That illustrates the difference between a citizen of heaven and a citizen of the world.

"I am a stranger in the earth; hide not Thy commandments from me." Yes, Lord, make the way clear and plain. While I'm on my pilgrim journey give me eyes to see and a will to obey your commandments—with my whole heart.

Something Extra ———

Group

1. State and discuss reasons for the need to understand our pilgrim status in order to be whole-hearted Christians.
2. Compare 2 Corinthians 4:18 and Ecclesiastes 5:10-14. From the Ecclesiastes passage find four reasons for not looking on, or trusting in, temporal things.

Individual

1. Meditate through Matthew 6:24-33
2. Read The Pilgrim's Progress

Memory verse: Psalm 119:54